
Angela McRobbie

Postmodernism and Popular Culture

The 'Soweto Dash'

Rather than starting with a definition of postmodernism as referring either to a condition of contemporary life, or a textual, aesthetic practice, I want to begin by suggesting that the recent debates on postmodernism possess both a positive attraction and a usefulness to the analyst of popular culture. This is because they offer a wider, and more dynamic, understanding of contemporary representation than other accounts to date. Unlike the various strands of structuralist criticism, postmodernism considers images as they relate to and across each other. Postmodernism deflects attention away from the singular scrutinizing gaze of the semiologist, and asks that this be replaced by a multiplicity of fragmented, and frequently interrupted, "looks."

The exemplary text or the single, richly coded, image, gives way to the textual *thickness* and the visual *density* of everyday life, as though the slow, even languid "look" of the semiologist is, by the 1980's, out of tempo with the times. The field of postmodernism certainly expresses a frustration, not merely with this seemingly languid pace, but with its increasing inability to make tangible connections between the general conditions of life today and the practice of cultural analysis.

Structuralism has also replaced old orthodoxies with new ones. This is apparent in its re-reading of texts highly placed within an already existing literary or aesthetic hierarchy. Elsewhere it constructs a new hierarchy, with Hollywood classics at the top, followed by selected advertising images, and girl's and women's magazines rounding it off. Other forms of representation, particularly music and dance, are missing altogether. Andreas Huyssen (1984) in his recent introduction of postmodernism draws attention to this "high" structuralist preference for the works of high modernism, especially the writing of James Joyce or Mallarme. "There is no doubt that center stage in critical theory is held by the classical modernists: Flaubert...in Barthes...Mallarme and Artaud in Derrida, Magritte...in Foucault;...Joyce and Artaud in Kristeva...and so on *ad infinitum*" (p. 39). He argues that this reproduces unhelpfully the old distinction between the high arts and the "low," less serious, popular arts. He goes on to comment, "Pop in the broadest sense was the context in which a notion of the postmodern first took shape, ...and the most significant trends within postmodernism have challenged modernism's relentless hostility to mass culture" (p. 16). High theory was simply not equipped to deal with multi-layered pop. Nor did it ever show much enthusiasm about this set of forms, perhaps because pop has never signified within one discrete discourse, but instead combines images with performance, music with film, or video, and pin ups with the magazine

form itself. As a *Guardian* journalist recently (3-1-86) put it, "Rock and pop performers today have to speak in multi-media tongues."

With the exception of Barthes, "heavy weight" criticism has been focussed towards memorable texts, while light-weight cultural analysis is given over to the more forgettable images of everyday life. And the "purity" of the about-to-be-decoded-image is reflected in the pivotal position occupied by semiology and structuralist criticism in media courses up and down the country. Despite gestures towards intertextuality and interdisciplinarity, this centrality given to *the structuralisms* in effect squeezes all the other complex relations which locate the text, or the image, and allow it to produce meaning, out of the picture. These relations include those which mark out its physical place within the world of commodities, its sequencing, and its audience as well as consumers. Such issues are frequently relegated, with some disregard, to the realm of sociology or "empiricism" as though these were the same thing. And while critics argue that this outside reality is really nothing more than a series of other texts, they are in the meantime happy to treat questions about consumers, readers, audience, and viewers, as intrinsically uninteresting, as though this entails hanging about street corners with a questionnaire and clipboard.

Postmodernism allows what were respectable sociological issues to reappear on the intellectual agenda. It implicitly challenges the narrowness of structuralist vision, by taking the deep interrogation of every breathing aspect of lived experience by media imagery as a starting point. So extensive and inescapable is this process that it becomes conceptually impossible to privilege one simple moment. So far only Dick Hebdige's (1979) *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* has broken out of this inadvertent reproduction of the old divide between high culture and the pop arts, as well as between representation and reality. In *Subculture*, Hebdige recognises that familiar objects warrant analysis as signs and repositories of organised meaning, as much as linguistic or "pure" visual signs. Under the conceptual umbrella of subculture, he brings together art, literature, music, style, dress, and even attitude, and places these on the same analytical plane. Hebdige also brings a speed and urgency to the business of interpreting the familiar marks of contemporary life.

It's surprising, then, that in a more recent article, where he engages directly with the question of postmodernism, Hebdige (1985) disavows the playful elements in *Subculture...* and, more manifestly, in the new fashion and style magazines. In contrast with what he sees now as an *excess* of style, a celebration of artifice and a strong cultural preference of pastiche, Hebdige seeks out the reassuringly real. He suggests that the slick joky tone of postmodernism, especially that found on the pages of *The Face* represents a disengagement with the real, and an evasion of social responsibility. He therefore insists on a return to the world of hunger, exploitation, and oppression and with it a resurrection of unfragmented, recognisable subjectivity. He only fleetingly engages with what Jameson (1983) has described as an important characteristic of the postmodern condition, that is the death of subjectivity and the emergence, in its place, of widespread social schizophrenia. Hebdige seems to be saying that if this rupturing of identity is what postmodernism is about, then he would rather turn his back on it. What I will be arguing here is that the terrain of all these surfaces Hebdige mentions—pop, music, style, and fashion—is neither as homogenous nor as limited as he (or *The Face*) would have it. This landscape of the present, with its embracing of pastiche, its small defiant pleasure in being dressed up or "casual," its exploration of fragmented subjectivity—all of this articulates more precisely with the wider conditions of present "reality"—with unemployment, with education, with the "aestheticisation of culture," and with the coming into being

of those whose voices were historically drowned out by the (modernist) meta-narratives of mastery, which were in turn both patriarchal and imperialist.

Postmodernism has entered into a more diverse number of vocabularies more quickly than most other intellectual categories. It has spread outwards from the realms of art history into political theory and onto the pages of youth culture magazines, record sleeves, and the fashion pages of *Vogue*. This seems to me to indicate something more than the mere vagaries of taste. More also, than the old Marcusean notion of recuperation, where a radical concept which once had purchase, rapidly becomes a commodity, and in the process is washed, laundered, and left out to dry. Later on in this paper I will locate this coming together of the worlds of intellectual analysis and pop journalism (as well as pop production) around postmodernism, by considering the role of education, and in particular "cultural studies." Here it is sufficient to point to the extensiveness and flexibility of the term.

Postmodernism certainly appeared in the UK like a breath of fresh air. It captured in a word, a multitude of experiences, particularly what Baudrillard (1983) has called the "instantaneity of communication." This refers to the incursion of imagery and communication into those spaces that once were private—where the psyche previously had the chance to at least explore the "other," to explore, for example, alienation. Baudrillard claims this space now to be penetrated by the predatory and globally colonialist media. But as the frontiers of the self are effaced and transformed, so too are the boundaries which mark out separate discourses and separate politics. Baudrillard interprets the new associative possibilities thrown up by "instantaneity" gloomily. "Everything is exposed to the harsh and inexorable light of information and communication" (1983, p. 130), which in turn generates only an "ecstasy of communication"... But need Baudrillard be quite so pessimistic? Why must this speeding-up process, this intensification or exchange be greeted with such foreboding?

The remainder of this paper will be given over to arguing the case for postmodernism. It will suggest that the frenzied expansion of the mass media has political consequences which are not so wholly negative. This becomes most apparent when we look at representations of the Third World. No longer can this be confined to the realist documentary, or the exotic televisual voyage. The Third World refuses now, to "us," in the West, to be reassuringly out of sight. It is as adept at using the global media as the old colonialist powers. Equally the "we" of the British nation no longer possesses any reliable reality. That spurious unity has been decisively shattered. New alliances and solidarities emerge from within and alongside media imagery. A disenchanted black, inner city population in Britain, can look in an "ecstasy of communication" as black South Africans use every available resource at hand to put apartheid into crisis. Jokily, and within a kind of postmodern language Dick Hebdige wrote, in *Subculture*, that TV images of Soweto in 1976 taught British youth "the Soweto dash." Ten years later this connection has amplified. The image is the trigger and the mechanism for this new identification.

Implosion

Of course it's not quite so simple. The South African government has recently banned journalists from the black townships. And in less politically sensitive arenas, the media continues, relentlessly, to hijack events and offer in their place a series of theatrical spectacles whose points of relevance are only tangentially on what is going on, and whose formal cues came from other, frequently televisual, forms of representation. 1985 was rich in examples. Reagan's illness was relayed to the public, overwhelmingly in the language of soap opera. A *Guardian* correspondent pointed out that nobody would have been

convinced if his doctors had not appeared at the press conferences dressed in white coats. A few weeks earlier Shi'ite militiamen took over a TWA airline in Athens. In what was largely a bid for space on Western prime-time television, the captors could afford to appear smiling and jubilant as they offered their victims a Lebanese banquet, against a backdrop of random gunfire at the ceiling, before packing them off to the United States.

This easing out of the real in favour of its most appropriate representation makes it more difficult to talk about the media and society today. It creates even greater difficulties in assessing the relationship between images, or between popular cultural forms, and their consumers. The consciousness industries have changed remarkably over the last ten years, but so have the outlook and the expectations of their audiences.

Against a backdrop of severe economic decline, the mass media continues to capture new outlets, creating fresh markets to absorb its hi-tech commodities. Symbolically the image has assumed a contemporary dominance. It is no longer possible to talk about the image and reality, media and society. Each has become so deeply intertwined that it is difficult to draw the line between the two. Instead of referring to the real world, much media output devotes itself to referring to other images, other narratives. Self-referentiality is all-embracing, although it is rarely taken account of. The Italian critic and writer, Umberto Eco, recently (1984) contrasted what TV was (paleo-TV), with what it now is, (neo-TV). "Its prime characteristic is that it talks less and less about the external world. Whereas paleo-television talked about the external world, or pretended to, neo-television talks about itself and about the contacts it establishes with its own public" (p. 19).

Self-referentiality occurs within and across different media forms. One TV programme might be devoted to the production of another (Paul Gambaccino "on" the Tube), just as television films based on the making of other large-scale cinema productions are becoming increasingly common. There is a similar dependency for material and content, as well as a relatively recent redefinition of what is interesting, and what readers and viewers want, in the print media's use of *televisual stories*. *The Face* magazine ran a piece on The Tube, and more recently on Michelle, the pregnant schoolgirl, in *East Enders*... The *NME* carried a major feature on Brookside, and *City Limits* sent two journalists to the Coronation Street set, for a week. It's not so much that fiction is being mistaken for fact; more that one set of textual practices (in this case British soap) has become the reference point for another (reading the newspaper or glancing at a headline).

Media interdependency is both an economic and a cultural imperative. Childrens' TV on a Saturday morning evolves entirely around the pop music industry, offering an exclusive showcase for new "promo" videos. The contents of these programmes are orchestrated around all the familiar pop business, phone-in to the stars, interviews, the new single, the talent competition for young hopefuls. This shows the feeding-off effect between mass media today. Where once the middle class world of Blue Peter documented childrens' initiatives for charity, now Capital, in the form of culture and visual communications, penetrates further into the youth market. In the *classless* world of these programmes this means pushing back the frontiers of young people as consumers by transforming children and even toddlers into fans and thus part of the record-buying public.

The implications of this endless cross-referencing are extensive. They create an ever-increasing, but less diverse verbal and visual landscape. It is these recurring fictions, and the characters who inhabit them which feed into the field of popular knowledge, and which in turn constitute a large part of popular culture. It

would be difficult not to know about Victoria Principal, it would be impossible not to know about Dallas.

Texts have always alluded to or connected with others. Simone de Beauvoir's (1974) *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* gives up many pages to all the other books she read during her childhood, adolescence and early adult years. Indeed this critical bibliography forms a major strand of the work. The difference now is that the process is less restricted to literature, more widespread, and most apparent in the commercial mass media where there are more spaces to be filled. And such an opening up doesn't necessarily mean an extension of rights of access, only rights of consumption. More often it means a form of cosy, mutual congratulatory, cross-referencing and repetition. (Wogan in Denver, Clive James in Dallas). Baudrillard (1983) greets these recent changes with some cynicism. He claims that more media offers less meaning in the guise of more information. "All secrets, spaces and scenes abolished in a single dimension of information." Eco (1984) follows this when he describes the scrambling effect of multi-channel choice on TV. "Switching channels reflects the brevity and speed of other visual forms. Like flicking through a magazine, or driving past a billboard. This means that 'our' TV evenings no longer tell us stories, it is all a trailer!"

Images push their way into the fabric of our social lives. They enter into how we look, what we earn, and they are still with us when we worry about bills, housing and bringing up children. They compete for attention through shock tactics, reassurance, sex, mystery and by inviting viewers to participate in series of visual puzzles. Billboard advertisements showing an image without a code, impose themselves, infuriatingly, on the most recalcitrant passerby.

However what is often forgotten is that the media also enter the classroom. This remains an undocumented site in the history of the image. But in seminar rooms across the country, slides are projected and students prise open new readings. The educational incorporation of contemporary mass media represents something other than the simple consumption of images, but it is also part of the widening out process I mentioned earlier. People's usage of and experience of the media increases not just because there is more of it, but because it crops up in different places. Almost all the new disciplines in the arts and social sciences make use of pop imagery, whether in adult education, on degree courses, or on project work with unemployed young people. This gives rise to a rather more optimistic reading of the mass media than that offered by Baudrillard. The invasive impact of these new technologies, because they now occupy a place within these institutions provide a basis for the production of new meanings, new cultural expressions. There is a myth that radical or challenging media forms come "from the street." In fact it is in the media workshops, in the creative writing classes and the college studios that such work emerges. Art students specialising in graphics and writing a dissertation on "left imagery" go on to work freelance for *The Face*; others opt for mainstream advertising agencies while working unpaid for the Labour Party, or the women's movement or for new black cultural groups. (This was certainly my experience teaching art students at St. Martin's School of Art in London.) And of course the history of British pop music is one which grew out of the expansion of the art schools in the 60's and the flooding into them of bright young working class boys.

It is not absolutely necessary for my argument that these new forms of pop culture are and have been of a homogenously high standard. It is much more important that the work itself is considered both in terms of where it comes from, who made it, and which groups have, in turn, taken it up.

Twenty years ago Susan Sontag (1966) offered an interesting perspective on those forms of popular culture which are good because they are so awful. This

was reflective of a *camp* sensibility, the essence of which is "its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration." Until then this was a widely felt, but as yet untheorised popular aesthetic. In her essay Sontag stressed the importance of the knowing audience, one which could allow itself absorption because it was equally capable of detachment. This is useful to us here because it offers a fruitful way forward in understanding the more combative side particularly to young peoples' engagement with culture. We can use both the notion of camp and that of the knowing audience to extend Jameson's (1983) recent attempt to make sense of the ever-accumulating and stultifyingly banal images which form such a staple part of the media output. He describes this as a new kind of depthlessness, a "waning in effect." Jameson applies the term pastiche to describe these circulating forms. This certainly has an immediate resonance. In both pop music and in the popular soap operas, pastiche is a dominant motif. According to Jameson pastiche is "without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared to which what is being imitated, is rather comic. Pastiche is blank parody..." (p. 114).

In *Dallas* and *Dynasty* this is the most appropriate way of describing the heightening of reality which becomes in turn a deadening unreality. These soaps signal a realism in which they have absolutely no investment. The practiced sincerity of the pop performer, his or her anxiety to convey real, recognisable, and searing emotions, carries the same quality. In each case the reference back to real life or real emotions is purely formal or stylistic. A mannerism pointing nowhere. But Jameson's accurate account of this "speech in a dead language," fails to engage with its reception. Perhaps this is because the bulk of his analysis of the "postmodern condition" is focussed towards art rather than popular culture, and in this arena little academic concern has been shown for audiences or consumers. However in that field where Jameson's thesis is most markedly appropriate, in pop music and its subsidiaries, there is no question of denying the consumers or fans their place. But how this integration is understood conceptually remains more problematic. Sontag's linking pastiche with its favoured audience, gay men, is instructive because she shows how a relationship evolved around a social minority making a bid for a cultural form in which they felt they could stake some of their fragmented and sexually deviant identity. The insistence, on the way, on both style and pleasure made the product attractive to those outside as well as inside. The result was the absorption of camp style into the mainstream of popular taste. Sontag's approach is useful because she is talking not so much about pure or original "artistic" invention. Rather she is describing how forms can be taken over, and re-assembled so as to suit the requirements of the group in question. This often means outstripping their ostensible meaning and ostensible function. In this capacity male gay culture has in the last few years had a remarkable impact. It has been explicit and outspoken, while holding onto both an aesthetic and a political discourse. In pop music, groups like Frankie Goes to Hollywood and Bronski Beat as well as performers like Marc Almond and Boy George have utilised many of the pastiche elements which Sontag describes, achieving mainstream success without blunting the edges of a celebratory homosexuality.

The advantages of Sontag's comments are that they emphasise *agency*. She brings the audience, the consumers, the "camp followers" into the picture without sidetracking into "empiricism." The same would have to be done with pop music and contemporary youth culture. It is impossible to understand Boy George and Culture Club's rise to prominence without considering the punk, art-school, London, "educated" subculture from which they emerged.

And, if media forms are so inescapable, "if unreality is now within everyone's grasp" (Eco, 1984), then there is no reason to assume that the consumption of pastiche, parody or high camp is, by definition, without subversive or critical potential. Glamour, glitter, and gloss, should not so easily be relegated to the sphere of the insistently apolitical. For the left, necessarily committed to endorsing the real and the material conditions of peoples' lives, there remains still an (understandable) stiffness about Neil Kinnock's appearance in a Tracy Ullman video. This need not be the case.

If, as Jameson suggests, life has been dramatised to the level of soap, if love is always life a *Jackie* story, then yes, the sharp distinction between real life and fictional forms must give way to a deep intermingling, unmeasurable and so far captured most precisely in fictive or cinematic forms. Scorsese's *King of Comedy* traced this "overdetermination by the image," as did Woody Allen's *Stardust Memories*, as well as his more recent *Zelig* and *The Purple Rose of Cairo*. But Gore Vidal's (1983) novel *Duluth* outstrips all of these. It is a model of postmodern writing. Gore Vidal has his tongue firmly in his cheek. *Duluth* is a witty multi-layered fiction which moves from the town of the title, to the soap series based on the place, outwards to the novel of the soap, backwards into the historical romances favoured by the town's top woman cop, and forwards into a science fiction setting where Roland Barthes makes a guest appearance. Obliging Vidal ends the novel by handing it over to a word processor.

All of this comes close to what Baudrillard (1981) infuriatingly calls implosion. It's a vague but appropriate term. It implies an outburst of energy which is nonetheless controlled and inclining inwards. Baudrillard, Eco and Jameson all see this as a totalising and all-immersing process. But none of them consider the new associations and resistances which have come into prominence by way of these processes in the last fifteen years. Many of these share more in common with the shattered energy of implosion, with Jameson's fragmented schizophrenic consciousness, than with the great narratives of the old left.

It was especially the art, writing, film-making and criticism of women and minority artists, with their recuperation of buried and mutilated traditions, their emphasis on exploring forms of gender- and race-based subjectivity in aesthetic productions and experiences, and their refusal to be limited to standard canonizations, which added a whole new dimension to the critique of high modernism and to the emergence of alternative forms of culture. (Huyssen, 1984, p. 27)

In the British context one would want to append to this formidable production not just the proliferation of pop culture and the challenge it has mounted to the mainstream arts, but also the involvement of youth in the creation of an egalitarian avant-garde. Of course this is no longer an avant-garde proper, since the privileging of the forms have been abandoned in favour of a cross referencing between forms, and notably between pop music and "art," between aesthetics and commerce, between commitment and the need to make a living. This leads directly to a further failing in Jameson's account. There is no recognition that those elements contained within his diagnosis of postmodernism—including pastiche, the ransacking and recycling of culture, the direct invocation to other texts and other images—can create a vibrant critique rather than an inward-looking, second-hand aesthetic. What else has black urban culture in the last few years been, but an assertive re-assembling of bits and pieces, "whatever comes to hand," noises, debris, technology, tape, image, rapping, scratching, and other hand me downs? Black urban music has always thrived on fake, forged identities, creating a facade of grand-sounding titles which reflect both the "otherness" of black culture, the extent to which it is outside that which is legitimate, and the way in which white society has condemned it to be nameless. Who, after all, is

Grandmaster Flash or Melle Mel? Or who was Sly and the Family Stone? Who mixed the speech by Malcolm X onto a haunting disco funk backing track? Reggae also parodies this enforced namelessness. Many of its best known musicians suggest a deep irony in their stagenames. Clint Eastwood, Charlie Chaplin, and so on.

In America graffiti remains the best example of fleeting, obsolescent urban aesthetics. It gives its creators fame once they get into the galleries but otherwise only faint notoriety.

It is a cultural identity which half mocks, half celebrates, the excesses of mainstream white culture. The graffiti painter is the Spiderman of the ghettos, projecting pure fantasy. A terminal vantage point on white consumer culture. Hip hop is a subculture which feeds for its material upon the alien culture which needs make no concession to blacks. The spray paints and comic book images of graffiti painting, to the disco beats and found sounds of rapping, are diverted from their mainstream domestic use and put out on the streets as celebration. For the white middle class kid, the comic heroes occupy a space of boredom. For the black ghetto kid they are transformed by graffiti art into fantastic visions invested with secret meanings (Atlanta and Alexander, 1981).

Alongside these largely male forms must be placed the writing of black women, the great explosion of the written word which writes a history otherwise condemned to remain only within popular memory. Toni Cade Bambara's (1983) prose is closest in rhythm to the jazz sounds of the city. It is breath-taking, agile writing, insisting on the pleasures, the wit and the idiosyncracies of a community more often characterised as monolithic and deprived. All of this is taking place within the cracks of a crumbling culture where progress is in question and society seems to be standing still.

There is no going back. For populations transfixed on images which are themselves a reality, there is no return to a mode of representation which politicizes in a kind of straightforward "worthwhile" way. Dallas is destined to sit alongside images of black revolt. And it is no longer possible, living within postmodernism, to talk about unambiguously negative or positive images. But this need not be seen as the end of the social, or the end of meaning, or for that matter the beginning of the new nihilism. Social agency is employed in the activation of *all* meanings. Audiences or viewers, lookers or users are not simple-minded multitudes. As the media extends its sphere of influence, so also does it come under the critical surveillance *and* usage of its subjects.

The reason why postmodernism appeals to a wider number of young people, and to what might be called the new generation of intellectuals (often black, female, or working class) is that they themselves are experiencing the enforced fragmentation of impermanent work, and low career opportunities. Far from being overwhelmed by media saturation, there is evidence to suggest that these social groups and minorities are putting it to work for them. This alone should prompt the respect and the attention of an older generation who seem at present too eager to embrace a sense of political hopelessness.

Sociology

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Editor's Note: The Journal had originally invited Angela McRobbie to respond to the "Hall Interview." Due to our early deadline, she generously allowed us instead to reprint her most recent article, which first appeared in Postmodernism: ICA Documents 4, (L. Appignanensi and G. Bennington, eds.) London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1986.